

Documents on Diplomacy: Resources

Briefing Memo XII: Prelude to a New Century

The end of the Cold War and the disintegration of the Soviet Union brought with it no parades—only the sense of an unknown and uncertain future. American foreign policy no longer fluctuated between isolationism and involvement—it simply wasn't possible to stay aloof. But the long conflict with the Soviet Union had been a major factor in American perceptions of the world, and policymakers were uncertain how to define both success and failure in the international arena without it.

Foreign policy, since at least the mid-1970s, moved between two very different tracks—the activist policy of hardliners who weren't afraid to flex America's military strength when necessary and those who saw the United States as one player in a complex and interdependent world and wanted to promote political stability by encouraging economic growth and respect for human rights. Presidents rarely had the luxury of choosing one response or the other.

Globalization and Foreign Policy

During the late 1980s, the administration of Republican President George H. W. Bush dealt with the complex global issues surrounding the environment and its effects on societies around the world. President Bush acted decisively when Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein invaded the neighboring country of Kuwait on August 1, 1990. Bush and his Secretary of State James Baker persuaded a broad coalition of nations—including Egypt and Saudi Arabia—to join, and the UN issued an ultimatum to withdraw. Saddam was quickly removed from Kuwait, but not from power, leaving larger regional issues unresolved.

Bush's successor, Democratic President Bill Clinton dealt with a series of regional conflicts in Bosnia and Rwanda but failed to further clarify America's post-Cold War role. Economic issues dominated the mid-1990s, and President Clinton supported a free trade agreement for North America and a successor organization to the 50-year-old General Agreement on Trade and Tariffs, named the World Trade Organization.

But on the other side of the world, a new threat was rising. The Soviet Union finally completed its withdrawal from Afghanistan in 1989, leaving behind its fundamentalist Islamic opponents some of whom had been funded and trained by the United States. These fighters, under the leadership of Osama bin Laden, were angered when Saudi Arabia joined the coalition against Saddam Hussein and allowed the United States to base troops on its territory. For these highly religious men, the presence of Western “crusaders” on Saudi soil was nothing short of blasphemous. Already angered by the lack of progress in resolving the issue of a Palestinian homeland, they decided to call on others to oppose the West and issued a *fatwa*, or declaration of war against the United States in 1996 and again in 1998.

September 11, 2001

Bin Laden's success on September 11, 2001, presented a major challenge to President George W. Bush and the United States. The United States moved troops into Afghanistan, where bin Laden was headquartered, and gathered support for an attack on neighboring Iraq when it was believed that Saddam Hussein was providing aid to his movement. Operation Iraqi Freedom began in March 2003. Even though Saddam Hussein was removed from power, tried, and condemned to death by the new Iraqi Provisional Government, Americans felt no safer.

The United States' military response in Afghanistan and Iraq caused hostility in the Arab world. Muslims felt that America was attacking Islam itself. In 2009, President Barack Obama specifically refuted this and set out to mend ties with the Islamic world. It is still unclear whether the death of Osama bin Laden in May 2011 increased U.S. security or calmed the hostility of the Muslim world toward the United States.

At the same time during the first decade of the 21st century, U.S. diplomats worked through the United Nations and other multilateral organizations on global issues and continued their work to define the challenges of the 21st century—and America's role in solving them. ■